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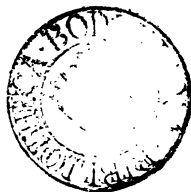
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**AN ACCOUNT OF THE PICTURE**  
**OF**  
**FREDERICK OVERBECK,**  
**REPRESENTING**  
**RELIGION GLORIFIED BY THE FINE ARTS ;**  
**NOW IN STÄDEL'S ART-INSTITUTE,**  
**AT FRANKFORT-ON-THE-MAINE.**

**WRITTEN IN GERMAN**  
**BY THE PAINTER HIMSELF,**  
**AND TRANSLATED BY**  
**JOHN MACRAY.**



**OXFORD :**  
**JOHN HENRY PARKER.**  
**1843.**



TO THE REVEREND  
HENRY WELLESLEY, M.A.,  
VICE-PRINCIPAL OF NEW-INN HALL, OXFORD.

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My Dear Mr. Wellesley,

I had often heard great praise bestowed on Mr. Overbeck's picture, representing the Christian Religion glorified by the Fine Arts, but from the vague statements given to me respecting it, I could not form a just idea of its composition. A few days ago, however, I was informed that there was a printed description of it in German by the artist himself; and having asked Mr. Macray, who is particularly conversant with modern German literature, if he knew it, he told me that he was not only acquainted with, but that he had translated it for his amusement, and would be much pleased if I would peruse his version, and accept it. I willingly did so, and found Mr. Overbeck's little work so interesting, that I asked permission to publish the English translation of it; and having obtained Mr. Macray's



consent, I now take the liberty of dedicating it to you, as a great amateur of the fine arts, and moreover an accomplished connoisseur of them, two things which are not very frequently to be met with together. This production of Mr. Overbeck, besides being an accurate representation of his picture, is an excellent lesson for young artists, as they will here learn how every particular which enters into the composition of their works, must be made the subject of profound study and reflection. Amateurs also will be taught by it the necessity of always enquiring into the reasons which have guided the artist, before they pronounce their judgment on his labours. I believe, therefore, the more it is known, the better, and trust that the present translation will be well received by English readers, and especially by one so fully qualified to appreciate its contents as yourself.

I remain,

my dear Mr. Wellesley,

yours sincerely,

MORTARA.

*Oxford, October 20, 1843.*

# RELIGION GLORIFIED

BY

THE FINE ARTS\*.

As many have expressed a wish that I would myself write some explanation of my picture, partly to prevent misconception, and partly to render intelligible what might otherwise be obscure to most people, and also to afford a help to the memory of all, I have thought it well to meet this wish by the following short account, which I have drawn up with a particular view to the benefit of young artists.

The first question seems naturally this; what name should be given to the picture, in order to convey, by one expressive designation, a perfect apprehension of its object and meaning? It appears to me, for the following reason, that its most appropriate name would be the title prefixed to this brief description; or, in fewer words still, the "Magnificat of Art;" for as the Blessed Virgin herself, at the top of the painting, utters her song of praise to excite all, as their leader, to give glory to God, so in like manner, the band of artists in the lower part of the picture, as it consists only of those

\* I am informed by the celebrated German engraver, Mr. Gruner, that there is an outline of this picture engraved by Mr. Amsler, who is now about to make a larger and more finished engraving from it.—THE EDITOR.

who, in a particular manner, dedicated their art to the service of Religion, expresses the same sentiment, namely, that the arts are only honoured in this picture in so far as they contribute to the glory of God, and thus form one of the fairest ornaments with which His Church is adorned.

The whole upper part of the picture, therefore, is to be considered as a vision, which swims before the mental eye of the painters below. Around the enthroned Virgin, with the Divine Infant, those saints of the Old and New Testament are placed, who have chiefly served as subjects for Christian art, with more particular reference, in the four front figures, to the individual arts of which they serve as representatives, God Himself having not only permitted the exercise of the arts, but on many occasions commanded them to be employed. Thus king David, on the Old Testament side of the picture, indicates Music; king Solomon, with the model of the brazen sea, Sculpture. On the New Testament side, St. Luke, according to the well-known pious legend, represents Painting; and St. John, with the plan of the heavenly Jerusalem at his feet, personifies Architecture. Poetry appears in the midst, in the person of the Blessed Virgin herself, recording that sublime song of praise; Poetry being the centre or point of union of all the arts, as the mystery of the Incarnation is the centre of all religious ideas founded upon Christianity. The remaining figures, on both sides of the picture, indicate a part of those inexhaustible riches which

Christianity proffers for the service of Art, so that it is in no respect necessary to look with longing eyes to the fables of heathenism, as if Christianity presented too narrow a field for the exercise of the painter's powers. The pictorial character of Religion, as richly suggestive of the arts, is further rendered evident, by God presenting us, in the Old Testament, with an image of what should afterwards take place in the fulness of time ; and in the New Testament, we see the Saviour imitated in His saints in the most various ways.

On the Old Testament side of the picture, Moses, Aaron, and Noah appear in front, with such attributes as indicate the divine order of the arts. Behind, the chief typical characters are placed ; Joshua, who led the Israelites into the promised land, as the Saviour leads His people into the kingdom of His Father ; Melchisedec, the representative of the eternal high priesthood of Christ ; and behind these, Joseph with a sheaf of corn, indicating the feeding of the faithful by the living bread from heaven. Farther off are seen Abraham with the sacrificial knife, as a type of the Eternal Father, Who delivered up His first-born Son as a sacrifice ; Sarah and Isaac, as types of the Church, and last of all, Adam and Eve, in the image of God, and the masterpieces of the heavenly Sculptor.

On the New Testament side, the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul with St. Stephen, next appear, in a sitting posture, indicating the three orders of the priesthood, bishops, priests, and deacons ; accord-

ing to the divine commission, "As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you." Christ's office of teacher is indicated by the Fathers, St. Augustine and Jerome, and by Thomas Aquinas; His sufferings by the Martyrs St. Sebastian and St. Fabian; His spotless purity by the Virgins St. Cæcilia and St. Agnes; and last of all, the group concludes by the empress Helena, with the Cross of Christ, pointing to the heavenly Adam, as the opposite group concludes with the earthly Adam. Both sides, therefore, are arranged with a regard to their corresponding relations, which yet are not brought forward too prominently, but are better left for the discovery of the spectator himself.

I now pass to the lower part of the picture, where the first object that meets our attention is the stream of water in the centre, representing, by the jet ascending from it, the image employed by our Lord in the Gospel, of the well of water springing up to everlasting life, thus denoting the heavenward direction of Christian art, in opposition to the idea of the ancients, who represented the stream as flowing downwards from Mount Parnassus. Every application of art, therefore, indicated in the picture, is only employed, in so far as it harmonises with the intention of the whole, as looking towards Heaven. Christian art is not exclusively confined to one branch, but embraces all; ennobling and sanctifying all, and presenting them as an offering to Him Who has imparted to man the capacity of exercising them. It is on this account that the water is

represented as reflecting two mirrors, in the upper one Heaven being depicted, and earthly objects in the lower, indicating the twofold nature of art, which on the one hand, according to its spiritual nature, descends from Heaven, together with every good thought, and on the other, employs the outward dress of visible forms, which it borrows from surrounding nature, to body forth its conceptions. This twofold sphere of art is represented by the masters nearest to the stream of water. Thus Giovanni Bellini and Titian, of the Venetian school, are contemplating in the lower mirror the images of two boys, one of whom, half-dressed, and with a posy in his hand, indicates the extreme pleasure taken by that school in splendour of colour; the other refers to the simplicity of the naked figures of the same school. Carpaccio and Pordenone, two other painters of the Venetian school, together with Correggio, form part of this group, the latter having his place assigned here owing to the peculiar delight he takes in the enchanting effects of light and shade.

On the other side Leonardo da Vinci is seen encouraging his pupils to rise to a higher sphere, and to strive after the ideal, which is not to be found in the lower regions of reality. Near him stands Holbein, not only because his works, in more than one respect, may be classed with Da Vinci's, but also because he serves as an example, how a lower department of art, such as portrait painting, may yet be consecrated to higher purposes,

by its relation to what is eternal, as Holbein has shewn, among others, by his well-known Dresden portrait.

Turning from this group to the left side of the painting, on the same terrace with the stream of water, we perceive the Tuscan school, with others, forming a semicircle around Dante, and listening to his inspired lay, to which he gave a complexion so thoroughly artistic, that the *Divina Commedia* may be considered as embracing the whole circle of ideas included within the range of Christian art. Next to him stand his contemporaries Giotto and Orgagna, and between them, Simon Memmi. Raphael comes next, surrounded by all those who exercised particular influence over his mind: on one side, Pietro Perugino, Ghirlandajo and Massaccio; on the other, Fra Bartolommeo and Francesco Francia. Raphael himself is dressed in a white robe, as symbolical of the universality of his genius, uniting all the qualities which we gaze on with wonder, in their separate state, in others, as the beams of light include the seven prismatic colours. Michael Angelo, sitting on a fragment of antique sculpture, is the last in this semi-circle. Lucas Signorelli, who is well known as his more immediate precursor in his peculiar style, sits beside him, appearing, like him, to be particularly inspired by Dante, and is encouraging Michael Angelo on that account to listen to his lay.

What Dante declares, in inspired song, on one side of the picture, is not less the object of agreement

among nations of the most varied character on the other side, to the right of the stream, and is depicted by groups of masters from the north and the south, who salute each other in delightful harmony, and unite in one effort, that of exalting and ennobling Religion.

Among those who stand next to the painters of the Venetian school, are to be found Italians, Germans, and Netherlanders, including such as are doubly connected by their practising the arts both of engraving and painting. Lucas of Leyden holds out his hand to Mantegna, and between them Albert Durer rises conspicuous, receiving the friendly greetings of both at the same time, while the former is accompanied by Martin Schön and the latter by Marcantonio. To these is joined a second group, consisting of the blessed Angelico da Fiesole, and the two brothers Van Eyck, who express, by their hearty salutations, the mutual acknowledgment of the efforts made by them in Christian art, by the latter while living in the busy world, and by the former in monastic life. By the side of Fiesole stands his pupil Benozzo Gozzoli, and Hemlink stands near his masters, the brothers Van Eyck, the younger of whom, John, is leaning on Hubart, the elder, who had been to him as a father. Together with these five, a sixth appears, representing the unknown designer of the cathedral of Cologne. A pilgrim, who seems desirous of joining himself to this company, is intended for Schoreel, who is well known to have performed a



journey to the Holy Land. Together with him, another stranger approaches, apparently a native of Spain. In the distance two female figures are seen, one of whom, a nun, is a pupil of Fiesole, and the other may represent Margaret Van Eyck, although neither is a likeness. Both may remind us of the not unfrequent success with which women have employed the fine arts in the service of religion.

That the young artist may take encouragement, seeing from what beginnings such great works have proceeded, as have issued from the hands of the various masters here assembled, two monks are represented sitting on the steps of the terrace where the meeting is held, deeply absorbed in contemplation of those miniatures, the fair fruits of piety and silent application, produced in the solitude of the monastery; from which he may learn that above all he must avoid the tumult of the world, and love retirement and application of mind, if he would tread in the footsteps of the great masters, and, like them, exercise the arts for religious purposes.

In like manner, as the painters are collected together on the terrace, the sculptors and architects have congregated in the fore-ground; the former to the left and the latter to the right. In the midst of the architects is a pope, and an emperor is amongst the sculptors, representing the two powers which as pillars support the edifice of the fine arts. Among the sculptors a group is formed around a sarcophagus, to the bas-relief of which Niccola Pisano is

directing attention, in allusion to what Vasari relates, that Niccola having met with an ancient sarcophagus, revived, by its study, the art of sculpture. Near him is seen a boy in a kneeling posture, personifying the delight taken by this art in grace of form and motion ; and around him are his pupils and fellow-workmen, some of whom, employed upon his great works, came to him from Germany.

But lest the young artist should be led to imagine that I am here recommending that unrestricted study of the antique, by which, unfortunately, on more than one occasion, a new heathenism has been introduced into the fine arts,—heathen arts, as such, are represented as scattered on the ground in fragments of broken idols, whilst the sarcophagus belongs to that earliest period of Christianity when the arts had as yet assumed no independent form, but employed that which they had brought with them from the heathenism which they had just abandoned. The bas-relief on the sarcophagus represents the two Maries on their way to the tomb of Christ, symbolical of the resurrection of the art to a new and spiritual life, while the old is borne to an honourable grave. Although heathenism, as such, should be looked upon by the Christian artist with decided disdain, yet the arts, as well as the literature of the ancients, may be turned to advantage, as the children of Israel employed the gold and silver vessels which they had brought with them out of Egypt, in the service of the true God in His temple, after they had melted them down and consecrated them anew.

Behind this group three other masters are seen, engaged in confidential conversation, and are intended to represent the three leading paths in sculpture; Lucas della Robbia being the representative of spirituality, and pious meditation; Lorenzo Ghiberti, who is the middle figure, of beauty of form; and Peter Vischer, of undeviating truthfulness of nature, three elements which ought never to be wholly separated in Christian sculpture.

As the sphere of the plastic arts is most appropriately made subordinate to the secular power, represented by the emperor, who appears upon the scene with another distinguished personage, both corresponding with the Old Testament side, so architecture, being more of a mystical nature, is placed on the New Testament side, and is associated with the spiritual power, indicated by the pope, who represents the universality of the church, as the emperor does that of the state. Together with the pope, there is also another bishop, who, in the narrower circle of a single diocese, personifies the same idea of ecclesiastical protection, extended to the fine arts.

The musical notes in the hands of the pope, remind us of the powerful influence of church music. Like the ancient fable, that represents the rude stones of the walls as first brought together by the charm of music, it is here emblematical of religious enthusiasm, which, as if by enchantment, has called into being the many splendid cathedrals and other churches that adorn the Christian world. On this side also, the arts of the ancients are represented by

fragments scattered on the ground, and next to these the basilica appears, as the earliest form of Christian churches, which, although they seem to have had their origin from the first Christians accidentally meeting with and employing the existing ancient remains, yet contain the germ of the gradually-formed and peculiar style of Christian architecture, in its simplest fundamental outlines.

Of these a sketch is given, and is pointed out by Pilgram, who is said to have been the architect of the finest part of St. Stephen's church in Vienna, to a circle of his pupils. These pupils consist of youths of different nations, who are listening to his instructions, each characterised by the distinctive features of the people to whom he belongs, in order by this means to bring into notice the varieties of national development of which the germ is contained in the basilica. The Frenchman is there, with all his elegant amiability and ease, sitting on the shaft of a pillar. Opposite to him kneels the grave and steadfast Englishman. Behind the latter is the profound and impassioned Spaniard, and a Franciscan novice, reminding us of the many buildings undertaken by the religious orders in Italy. Last of all, a native of the East serves as a support to Pilgram, in allusion to the influence of the architecture of the East on that of the West, which in earlier times was seen in the widely-spread Byzantine style, and at a later period in the Moorish, during the Crusades. Erwin von Steinbach, the well-known architect of the Strasburgh

minster, joins himself to this group, as the representative of the pointed style, and is placing before the pope a sketch of a gothic cathedral, and enthusiastically directing attention to its majestic and heaven-piercing spire, in which enthusiasm the pope and the bishop seem to share, while Brunelleschi, as the author of the modern style in architecture, is surveying the plan with a critical eye. Behind him Bramante is engaged in conversation with the German architects, one of whom, the individual in the black cap, built the cathedral of Ulm ; the other, not being the likeness of any particular person, may serve to represent one of the many unknown architects who adorned our father-land with so many splendid structures.

And now, my dear young friend and brother-artist, who are striving so ardently to excel in the fine arts, I have placed a picture before you in which you may wander as in a garden. Here you see all the great masters, at the mention of whose names your heart has so often beat higher, assembled together in beautiful harmony ; so that you may approach them with confidence, and become more intimately acquainted with them. See how the future lies spread before you, like the bright distance in this picture, that you may be encouraged thereby to the noble task of contributing to the completion of the edifice which was begun so nobly by those masters, and partly executed, in a style of wonderful magnificence. This is indicated in a manner not to be mistaken, in the centre of our picture, by that

unfinished structure† whose termination was prevented by the melancholy strifes that broke out in our country in the sixteenth century, leading to long and desolating wars, robbing Germany of so many of her ornaments, and entirely checking her in the perfect development of the fine arts. Be it yours to resume what was then interrupted, and to complete what was left unfinished. Strive to approach the great masters with all the powers of your mind, but know that you can only reach their eminence by treading in their footsteps, and steadily keeping the goal in view, which I have endeavoured in this picture to place before you. True art will not be placed as an idol upon the altar, but will rather minister in the sanctuary. There you should seek her and find her, in the dress by which she is rendered truly pleasing both to God and man, if indeed you are yourself walking in the paths of faith and piety, and dedicating your gifts to God the Lord, from Whom you have received them, for by such an one she will be found.

Several of the masters here assembled may serve as a warning to you, how the misemployment of talents leads away from the right path, and inevitably tends to the degradation of the fine arts. In this way the Venetians went astray, as soon as they began to make colouring the principal object of attraction, instead of continuing to employ it as a source of ornament ; and so by degrees they became sunk in sensuality, and sought only to captivate the

† The cathedral of Cologne.

eye. The effeminate Correggio proceeded in this career at a more rapid rate than even the Venetian school, until he cast aside every restraint of modesty and morality, and gave himself up to unbridled voluptuousness.

Michael Angelo was so fascinated by admiration of the antique, as to set it up in his school as an object of idolatry ; and Raphael was later in attaining the full mastery of his comprehensive powers, as he also was tempted to stretch out his hand to taste of the forbidden fruit, and found the restraints of religion a burden to him. And so the sin of apostacy in the fine arts became manifest about their time in various places, inasmuch as God was not honoured, but self was exalted and worshipped. This sin of forgetting God was justly punished by our being forsaken of Him in return, so that we saw with astonishment the sudden decline of the arts, and a state of unbounded degeneracy succeed, filling us with the greater indignation, as giving birth to so many proofs of its evil condition.

In after times, indeed, various attempts have been made to elevate the fine arts to a higher position, but as no remedy was applied to the source of the evil, the result of such exertions was on the whole unsuccessful. This is also the reason why none of the celebrated masters of later times have been introduced into our painting, not that we deny their merit as painters, but because the character of their works does not entitle them to be classed among the patterns of Christian art.

In conclusion, you may unhesitatingly adopt it as a general principle, that the fine arts can only be beneficial to man, when, like the wise virgins, they go out to meet the bridegroom in humility and modesty, with their lamps burning, and fed with the faith and the fear of God ; and that it is only as such daughters of Heaven that they are worthy of your love. In this way only can they hope for a blessing from above, without which success is unattainable, for it is impossible that God can bless any undertaking that is not founded on His fear. To Him, therefore, let honour and praise be given, through our handy works, in His temple, that is, His church here on earth, that we may hereafter praise Him eternally, with His angels and His saints, in Heaven. Amen.

*Rome, 1840,*



